

HOW I PRODUCE, MANAGE AND MARKET FORAGES

Bill Payne
Knob Lick Farm LLC

I would like to amend the title to: “How I Produce, Manage and Market Forages, Profitably.” My experience has led me to believe that keeping things simple has allowed me to focus better and that has led to profitability. This has led me to make every effort to reduce my reliance on machinery and to allow the cows to do the work. I focus on maximizing forage utilization and minimizing the number of days of feeding stored feeds.

One of the ways to achieve this goal is to graze standing corn. I plan to start grazing corn on September 15, when we stop grazing alfalfa. My experience has shown that:

- Offering smaller strips improves utilization
- Beginning earlier in season improves utilization of fodder
- Works better with older/heavier stock; ours are 900—1200 pounds
- Corn probably provides more nutrition than necessary for dry, pregnant cows
- Cattle will clean up almost all ears if allowed to do so

The next strategy we use to extend the grazing season is to use winter annuals such as cereal rye, oats, turnips and annual ryegrass. When planted in late summer or early fall these can provide high quality winter grazing.

Permanent pastures which I plan to renovate by frost seeding in the following February are grazed in late fall or early winter. Good results can be realized if the pastures are grazed **closely** before broadcast seeding. I have found that some dirt should be visible as you walk across the pasture.

Probably the least expensive option for winter grazing is stockpiled fescue. Fescue at this time of year is at its nutritional peak and quite palatable. In order to utilize stockpiled fescue:

- Select pasture in spring
- Test soil and correct fertility and pH
- Graze or mow **closely** first week of August
- Add nitrogen first week of August; consider using a N stabilizer on urea
- Begin grazing after all other grazing resources have been used—strip grazing will improve utilization

When all pasture forage has been consumed, then we start feeding stored alfalfa/orchardgrass balage. This can be high quality feed, but is necessarily more expensive. We unroll bales in the pasture for our heifers until there is sufficient spring forage available to graze again.

Other methods of increasing forage utilization include:

- Use of rotational grazing (or MIG)
- Use of leader/follower grazing systems for cow/calf programs
- Use of Spring & Fall calving seasons

Increasing forage utilization is not the only important goal necessary to realize a profitable livestock system. Increased forage quality is also necessary. We use several strategies to improve quality. Among these are pasture renovation to add legumes to our pastures. We graze rotationally to keep grass in vegetative state. We use balage because it is easier to harvest in early May. It is also of higher nutritional value and it loses less quality and quantity because of the plastic wrap. Grazing alfalfa/orchardgrass pastures in July, August and September allow us to avoid the problems associated with grazing fescue in hot weather.

To summarize my strategy for increased profits in livestock operations, I suggest letting the cows do more work by grazing as many days as possible. Increasing forage utilization throughout the year will also improve productivity. Increasing forage quality will enhance animal performance. These factors cannot only yield profits, but can decrease stress for all concerned.

Knob Lick Farm LLC also produces alfalfa/orchardgrass mixed hay for sale. We attempt to produce adequate quantity and quality hay by selecting high quality varieties; we have been using grazing tolerant varieties for about eight years now. We test our soils annually and correct nutrient deficiencies. For the first time, this year, we have applied fertilizer between cuttings to avoid luxury consumption which plagues fall applications. Planting takes place in the spring with a no-till drill. Frequently the first cutting is rolled and wrapped as balage. I frequently refer to the UK Forage website for research and production information: www.uky.edu/Ag/Forage.

These are a few of the market characteristics which we have discovered:

- Alfalfa/orchardgrass mix is in demand; there is also a market for straight orchardgrass and timothy/alfalfa mixes
- Must be of excellent quality—no mold, weeds
- Must be green in color
- We have a competitive advantage—little alfalfa is produced south of Kentucky. We are the closest alfalfa producers to the Florida market for horse hay. Increasing fuel costs make this even more important. The Central Kentucky market for horse hay is also important, but sometimes hard to access.

While the profit potential for cash hay sales is reasonable, there are some drawbacks to consider. Some of these are:

- *High stress due to poor hay curing weather during typical Kentucky summers*
- *Need for an alternative use for weather damaged hay*
- *Plan on receiving a bad check occasionally*
- *Little market demand for round bales or balage*
- *Labor and machinery intensive*

We have some valuable resources today to aid our marketing efforts. One of these is the internet, which can put our name in front of a very select audience—people who are looking for hay. I have found that the following internet sites have helped me in my marketing efforts.

- www.haybarn.com
- www.hayexchange.com
- www.kyagr.com/buyky/corral/haylistingpara.asp
- Many State Departments of Agriculture have hay sale sites
- Offering delivery service will expand your market

Forage production is a natural resource of our humid climate. While there are several ways to utilize this forage, I think livestock production makes the most sense. Grazing livestock is nature's way of utilizing forage. It is also a way of adding value to forage. So we can keep it simple (KISS) and let the cows do the work. Our job is to keep an adequate quantity of high quality forage in front of them—and to cash the checks!